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The Factors Influencing Class Teacher Students' Evaluations Relating to the Quality of Initial Teacher Education in Tallinn University

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Abstract

Problem Statement: Over the past few decades Estonian society has been facing social, cultural, economic and technological changes and challenges. Education and teaching are the key-elements in the light of understanding and coping with the changes in the society. Therefore the professionalism of teachers and the high quality teacher education are the most highlighted issues in discussions connected with educational reform in Estonia. Due to the many new and rapidly changing tasks and roles teachers are expected to fulfill, substantial improvements and reforms of teacher education are seen as imperative.

Purpose of Study: Fostering the dialogue between all the parties involved in teacher education and its reform, it's important to know, how student teachers themselves evaluate the initial teacher education. The current presentation introduces the results of a research the aim of which was to get information about student teachers' opinions about the quality of initial class teacher education in the Tallinn University in order to overlook the class teacher curriculum and initial class teacher education generally.

Research Methods: The qualitative research method in the form of free writing was used for getting empirical research data. The main questions that researcher-teacher trainer wanted to get answer to, were: which factors influence student class teachers' opinions towards quality of their education the most? What are they or are not satisfied with?

Findings: More than half of the students said that one of the indicators of quality of teacher education is the lecturers' professionalism. Next frequent issues named in the students' writings were connected with general and didactic subjects. Almost all the statements about didactic subjects expressed satisfaction. Statements connected with general subject mostly expressed dissatisfaction. The percentage of students satisfied with more general subject is connected with the year of studies.

Conclusions: The results of the research showed that the most visible factor of evaluating the quality of education seems to be lecturers' professionalism, devotion, communication skills and attractiveness. The next important aspect is the amount and the place of practical subjects and the balance between didactic and general subjects. It seems to be necessary to re-look the class teacher curricula and initial teacher education in general from this viewpoint and to make needed changes.

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Keywords: Initial teacher education; quality of initial teacher education; indicators of the quality of education

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades European societies have been facing social, cultural, economic and technological changes and challenges, which have been especially visible and rapid in the former Soviet countries, including Estonia. Education and teaching are the key-elements in the light of understanding and coping with the changes in the society. Therefore the quality of teachers has become a major concern of policy-makers, college and university presidents, especially at the universities of teacher education, and the public in general. Every child deserves a quality teacher. In an era of increasing standards and accountability in education, teacher quality and teacher training will be more important than ever (Soni, 2007). The professionalism of teachers and the high quality teacher education are the most highlighted issues in discussions connected with educational reform also in Estonia (Helme, 2010; Kerb, 2011; Listra, 2011; Mattisen, 2011). Due to the many new and rapidly changing tasks and roles teachers are expected to fulfill, substantial improvements and reforms of teacher education are seen as imperative (Green Paper of Teacher Education in Europe, 2000).

Fostering the dialogue between all the parties involved in teacher education and its reform, it's important to be aware of the factors influencing class teacher students' evaluations relating to the quality of initial teacher education and to know, how students teachers themselves evaluate the education they get during initial teacher education. The current paper introduces the results of the research the aim of which was to get information about student teachers' opinions about the quality of initial class teacher education in the Tallinn University in order to overlook the class teacher curriculum and initial class teacher education generally.

2. Short theoretical background

Research shows that teacher quality is significantly and positively correlated with pupil attainment and that it is the most important within-school aspect explaining student performance (its effects are much larger than the effects of school organisation, leadership or financial conditions) (Improving the Quality of Teacher Education, 2007, 3; Policy Review on Teacher Education for Inclusion, 2010).

Changes in education and in society place new demands on the teaching profession. These changes require teachers not only to acquire new knowledge and skills but also to develop them continuously. To equip teacher with skills and competences for its new roles, it is necessary to have both high-quality initial teacher education and a coherent process of continuous professional development keeping teachers up to date with the skills required in the knowledge based society (Improving the Quality of Teacher Education, 2007, 5; Menon et al, 2007).

The concept of quality is multi-facial and dependent on the context. Therefore it is almost impossible to form a general definition, which would satisfy everyone involved in the system of teacher education. As an open and dynamic system teacher education is embedded in different spheres with a large number of different participants. Regarding the core issues of teacher education and the teaching profession the participants may have different views, interests and power, including different view and interest about the concept of the quality of teacher education and about the quality of teacher education itself.

One of the most widely spread approaches of the concept of quality among the educational spheres is that quality shows the extent of achievement of the set up goals. The concept of quality can also be explained as corresponding with standards and with needs of coping successfully in everyday work or as self-improvement etc. (Harvey, 1995; Lomas, 2002; Pukk, 2010; Scott et al., 1996; Tam, 2001). Also personal satisfaction should be one of the indicators how the student teachers perceive the quality of teaching.

There is two major interest groups of the quality of teacher education in the Tallinn University: teacher trainers and student teachers. Both of them must follow the standards of the teacher's profession while evaluating the quality of teacher education (Standard of teacher's profession, 2005). Teacher education in Estonia is also regulated by the Framework Guidelines for Teacher Education. The framework guidelines set out general and special requirements for teacher education, novices' induction year, and teachers' in-service training (Framework Guidelines for Teacher Education, 2000; General Guidelines for Teacher Education, 1995).

According to the TNTEE (Thematic Network on Teacher Education in Europe) publication "Green Paper of Teacher Education in Europe" (2000), three aspects seem to be of the utmost relevance for the best possible academic teacher education:

- Teachers are supposed to acquire competence to establish powerful learning environments in order to make high quality education and training a reality.
- Teachers should be able to transform academic knowledge into teaching and learning situations in order to make provision of a broad knowledge base.
- Co-operative problem solving and teamwork seem to be indispensable to meet the challenges of teaching and learning.

For high quality teacher training and trainers is essential to equip new teachers with the knowledge, competences, skills, attitudes, awareness and confidence required to teach, to be pro-active and to manage change as professionals in a rapidly evolving environment (Teacher Education in Europe, 2008, 12).

3. Overview of the study

The profession of teaching is becoming more and more complex. The demands placed upon teachers are increasing. The environments in which they work are more and more challenging. Many EU Member States, including Estonia, are reviewing the ways in which teachers are prepared for the important tasks they perform on behalf of European society. Improving the quality of Teacher Education is, therefore, an important goal for Europe's education systems (Improving the Quality of Teacher Education, 2007).

Before to start larger improvements and changes of teacher education in Estonia, it's essential to find out, how student teachers themselves evaluate the quality of initial class teacher education.

Do student teachers find ample opportunities to learn the necessary competencies in the existing teacher education program? Does initial teacher education with its focus on either "the practical" or on number of academic disciplines provide the competencies necessary for transformation processes? Does initial teacher education provide adequate learning environments? These questions were frequently discussed with student class teachers with the aim of getting the first impression on how they evaluate the quality of the initial teacher education in the Tallinn University.

The qualitative research method in the form of free writing was used for getting empirical research data. The main questions that I as teacher trainer wanted to get answer were: which factors influence student class teachers' opinions towards quality of their education the most? What are they or are not satisfied with?

3.1. Principles of collecting empirical data

The 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th year students were asked to write freely about their opinions and attitudes towards their studies in Tallinn University after short period of discussions about the quality of teacher education in general and in the Tallinn University in particular. Both, the full day (stationary) (2nd, 3rd and 4th year) students and distance-learning (3rd and 5th year) students were involved in the study. Participation was voluntary for students and writings were anonymous.

Altogether 50 writings from 85 possible were collected: 33 from stationary students and 17 from distance learning students. The reason for choosing the courses named above was the wish to find out whether or not completing teaching practice change student teachers' vision about the quality of education: the 2nd year stationary and the 3rd year distance learning students have not passed school practice yet.

The collected texts were analysed with qualitative content analyse. Students' statements were divided into bigger categories according to the questions the researcher wanted to get answers to and the theoretical approach (Metsämuuronen, 2007). The basis for forming the categories was found from students' writings. The following categories were found: a) statements connected with university teachers, b) with didactic subjects, c) with general subjects, d) with practice and e) statements connected with getting more concrete practical hints.

3.2. Results of the research

Before describing the results of the preliminary analysis of the collected data, it would be reasonable to announce that named study is the first step for starting broader research and therefore the results are not transferable for deeper generalization yet. But it is possible to get the first impression about general tendencies.

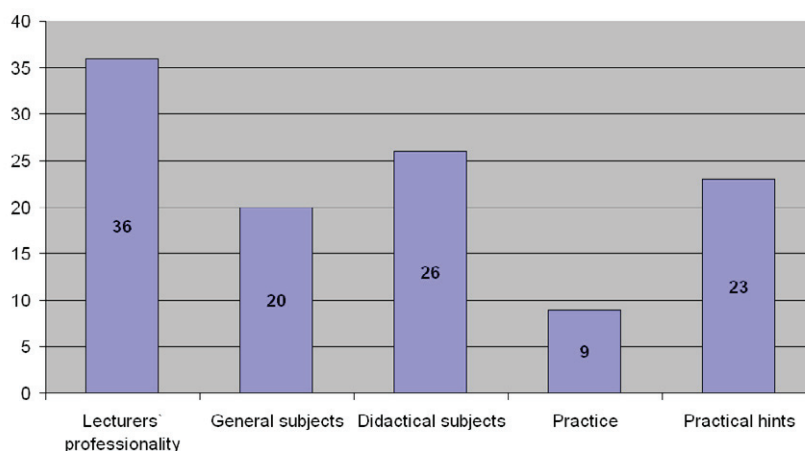


Figure 1. The number of students by mentioned categories.

As shown in Figure 1, more than half of the students (36 from 50 respondents) said that one of the indicators of quality of teacher education is the lecturers' professionalism. As all the statements about the lecturers were also counted separately, it can be said that 36 students noted altogether 70 times (average 1.9 statements per writing) something about the named issue. The biggest number of statements in one text connected with the teacher trainers' professionalism was 6.

Statements connected with lecturers can be divided into two subcategories by the content of statement: expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Student class teachers evaluate the lecturers' professionalism rather highly in Estonia. They appreciate the lecturers, who have had real teaching experiences or in the other words, *who themselves have been as acting teachers*, because in this case *the lecturer can connect theoretical knowledge with the practical school life and is able to give examples from real life*. Students prefer the lecturers, *who themselves teach as they speak about how students must teach*. Also lecturers' ability of *making lectures attractive and making jokes relevant to the subjects* is seen as the criteria of professional teacher trainer. Students expect more personal feedback and communication from the lecturers. They value highly lecturers' *readiness to listen students' opinions and to have open-minded bilateral discussion*. What they do not like is that a lecturer *reads his/her text exactly as it is in Power Point slides*. They see it as *the total waist of time, because they all can read themselves*. The latter was the most named negative opinion about lecturers. Students consider lecturers as the most influencing factor for the learners to evaluate the quality of education. Rather many students stated that the biggest motivator for learning is lecturer's *positivism and devotion to her/his job*. The next frequent opinion, showing dissatisfaction with lecturers, was that *university teachers do not cooperate with each other*. There are rather many overlapping themes/issues within different lecturers' lectures. That means that lecturers are not familiar with each other's work.

Figure 2 show that lecturers' professionalism influences the evaluations on the quality of teacher education the most among younger students: year after year its influence decreases.

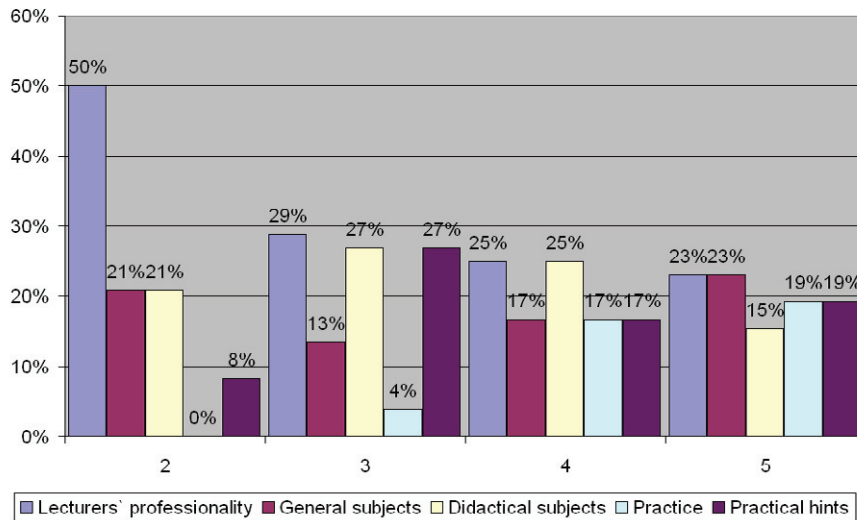


Figure 2. Categories researched and percentage of students who mentioned certain category (by study years).

Next frequent issues named in the students' writings were connected with general and didactic subjects. These statements were not counted by the researcher, but only marked as showing satisfaction or showing dissatisfaction.

Generally can be said that almost all the statements about didactic subjects expressed satisfaction. Students noted that didactic subjects give or have given them *self-confidence and strong basis for coping in everyday school life and in practice*. Despite of this, they are still very interested in getting even more and more specific practical hints. For example: *how to manage with unexpected behavior; to get examples on how an absolutely perfect lesson looks like; strategies for coping in multicultural classroom; to get a lot of ready-made lesson descriptions; to learn how to use modern technical equipments*; etc.

Statements connected with general subject, on the other hand, mostly expressed dissatisfaction. Students find that they *do not see the connection between some general subjects and practical schoolwork*. The most problematic seems to be the overly large number of students participating in these courses: *students feel themselves anonymous; they do not feel personal involvement with the subject and the lecturer; they cannot discover, how the subject can help them to cope with real schoolwork*; etc. But there were also students, who were rather satisfied with general subjects. As it is seen in Figure 2, the percentage of students satisfied with more general subject is connected with the year of studies: the more a student is aware of the future profession and feels herself being safely and strongly equipped with practical knowledge and skills, the more she starts to evaluate general knowledge and associate these knowledge with real work.

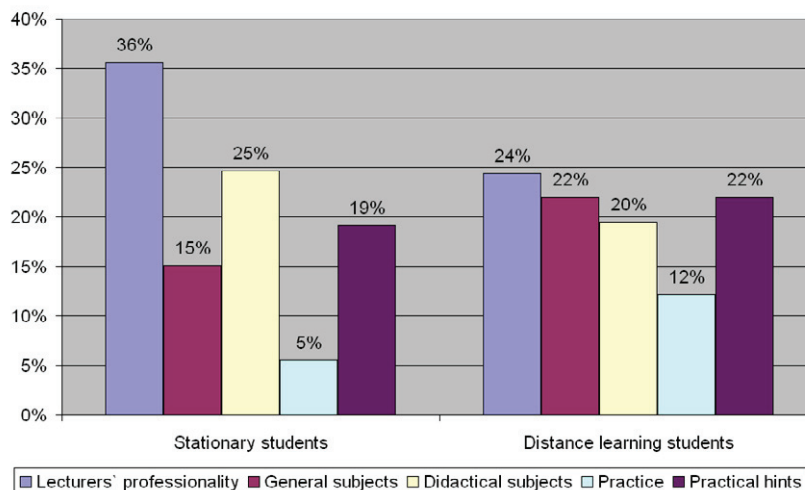


Figure 3. Categories researched and percentage of students who mentioned certain category (by form of study).

The same tendency appears while comparing the statements of stationary students and long distance learning students: the latter are mostly practicing teachers (Figure 3).

4. Conclusion

The main aim of the study described in current paper was to get the first notion about student class teachers' attitudes towards the quality of their education in the Tallinn University and towards the quality of initial teacher education in general. It is essential for teacher trainers to know, whether or not future teachers in their own opinion acquire competence to establish powerful learning environments during initial teacher education. Whether or not they feel themselves to be able to transform academic knowledge into teaching and learning situations in order to make provision of a broad knowledge base. The same important is to be aware, which factors the most influence the student teachers personal satisfactions with initial teacher training in order to feel themselves ready of managing with rapidly changing tasks and roles as future teachers.

The results of studying student class teachers' free writings showed that the most visible factor of evaluating the quality of education seems to be lecturers' professionalism, devotion, communication skills and attractiveness. The next important aspect is the amount and the place of didactic/practical subjects and the balance between didactic and general subjects. The question about how to present theoretical subjects and knowledge in the manner that student teachers perceived them as an inevitable assumption for being successful in practical schoolwork is as old as the human kind.

It is necessary to re-look the class teacher initial education in Estonia from the viewpoints of the results of the study and to make needed changes.

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